

CAFOs, Self-Determination, and Grassroots Democracyⁱ

John Ikerdⁱⁱ

May you live in interesting times! This supposedly is an ancient Chinese proverb – some say a curse. In the original language, the word for “interesting times” is the same as the Chinese word for crisis that is commonly interpreted to mean both danger and opportunity. Scholars tend to agree on the “danger” half of the word, but suggest the meaning of the other half is closer to “a critical point in time” than to “opportunity.” I like Webster's definition of crisis as a critical point in time when we are forced to make choices that will fundamentally change the future, for either better or for worse. Living in interesting times may be either a blessing or a curse. Regardless, we most certainly are living in “interesting times” today.

These are times President Obama described as times of “gathering clouds and raging storms” in his inaugural address. At such times, he said, America has carried on not because of the skill or vision of those in high office, but because “We the People have remained faithful to the ideas of our forebearers, and true to our founding documents.” We are at a critical point in time, he said, when we must “reaffirm our enduring spirit” and “choose our better history.” Not return to our darker history of discrimination, oppression, and global imperialism, but to our better history of equality, self-determination, and mutual respect. We are living in times, he proclaimed, when we must find the courage “to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.”

In rural communities all across America, among the darkest clouds gathering on the horizon are the threats posed by large-scale confinement animal feeding operations – chicken, hog, and dairy CAFOs. The raging storms of winds fouled by noxious odors, water polluted by manure, and a multitude of environmentally related illnesses are yet to come. Many other communities are already in the midst of the raging storms. In these communities, the air and water pollution, public health risks, and economic and social decay that inevitably arrive with CAFOs are an everyday reality.

CAFOs are not just rural problems. They are the epitome of the challenges confronting the whole of America. The threats confronting rural people today have the same roots as the threats confronting our natural environment, our economy, and our society as a whole. The people of rural America are at a critical point in time when they must make decisions that will change not just the future of their communities but the future of our nation – even the future of humanity. At this time of crisis, rural people must reclaim their fundamental rights to self-defense and self-determination and join in a new revolution to restore grassroots democracy.

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ⁱⁱ John Ikerd is Professor Emeritus, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO – USA; Author of, *Sustainable Capitalism*, <http://www.kpbooks.com>, *A Return to Common Sense*, <http://www.rtedwards.com/books/171/>, *Small Farms are Real Farms*, Acres USA, <http://www.acresusa.com/other/contact.htm>, and *Crisis and Opportunity: Sustainability in American Agriculture*, University of Nebraska Press <http://nebraskapress.unl.edu>; Email: JEIkerd@centurytel.net; Website: <http://faculty.missouri.edu/ikerdj/>.

The strategies of those who promote CAFOs are the same as those who have been promoting economic exploitation of all types across the continent and around the world. The promoters of CAFOs commonly target communities that are desperate for economic development, although they may later branch out into surrounding areas. Local leaders are told that the CAFO will add to local employment and increased the local tax base. The benefits of local spending for buildings, equipment, feed, and feeder livestock are supposed to multiply as they ripple through the local economy, increasing spending for groceries, clothes, housing, automobiles, healthcare, and other services. Increased property tax collections are supposed to pay for better local schools, roads, and other public services.

The promoters claim that the CAFOs are a natural result of a highly-efficient, “free market” economy. CAFOs are growing in number because they are more profitable for farmers and can produce more meat and milk at a lower cost. Local community leaders and farmers are told that CAFOs are the future of animal agriculture. If they aren't allowed to locate in one community they will just locate in another. Community leaders are warned that if they reject CAFOs they will be denying local farmers an opportunity to compete in the global economy. The community will be left without an agricultural economy because there are no viable alternatives to CAFOs.

We find these same basic strategies used by industrial corporations all across America and around the world. Corporations look for places to locate new factories where people are so desperate they will work hard for low pay and few benefits and are willing to tolerate pollution and health risks if they can get jobs. Communities are promised all the benefits of economic development while any potential problems are denied. Those who oppose new industries are accused of denying jobs to local residents and standing in the way of economic development. Political leaders are told there is no viable alternative to industrial economic development.

Initially, most opponents of CAFOs are concerned about noxious odors. As they become more informed on the issues, they become aware of other environmental risks – specifically, the risks to human health associated with pollution of air and water. They learn about the growing concerns for E-coli O157:H7 and antibiotic resistant bacteria, including MRSA, associated with CAFOs. As opponents connect with those in existing CAFO communities, they become increasingly concerned about the potential impacts on the overall quality of life. They begin to challenge the economic claims of CAFO proponents, because people in other communities have been made the same empty promises.

These are much the same concerns as those raised about industrial operations dating back to the 1960s. In fact, the environmental movement of the '60s and '70s has a lot in common with the fight against CAFOs today, although many rural people are uncomfortable with an environmentalist label. Industrial operations polluted the environment with industrial chemicals, rather than biological organisms, but both put human health at risk. In fact, CAFOs have much more in common with industry than with farming. They are animal factories with all the associated environmental, safety, and public health risks of industry in general.

When new industries come into a community they invariably pledge to become responsible members of the community. Those promoting CAFOs make the same promise. However, the

only responsibilities large corporations feel obligated to fulfill are their economic responsibilities to their stockholders. They have every intention of moving elsewhere as soon as they find someplace else where people willing to work even harder for less money or are less concerned about pollution and health risks. Corporate industry routinely has moved its operations to other “less-developed” countries, leaving thousands of American communities in shambles. There is every reason to believe that corporate agribusiness will do the same with its CAFOs.

In the early days, differences of opinion between CAFO advocates and opponents were understandable. The environmental impacts of CAFOs were assumed to be “substantially equivalent” to other agricultural operations. Their ecological, social, and economic impacts were still largely unknown. Earlier research had focused on the negative economic and community impacts of large, industrial agricultural operations in general.¹ Many of these earlier studies had been of communities dominated by large-scale crop production and there was no proof that these earlier studies were also relevant to large-scale confinement animal feeding operations. However, we now know that CAFOs are the epitome of industrial agriculture. There is no longer any legitimate reason for the conflicting opinions to continue.

With respect to risks of CAFOs on the natural environment and public health, a growing body of scientific evidence confirms that the concerns of CAFO opponents are fully justified, perhaps even understated. Those who continue to deny the existence of sound science confirming such risks are either completely misinformed or have a concept of science that is simply too narrow to address the actual environmental health risks of CAFOs.

Some proponents admit that numerous scientific studies have found evidence of health risks but they point to other studies that have found no significant linkage between CAFOs and human health. For example, a 2004 Government Accounting office (GAO) report concluded, “Antibiotic-resistant bacteria have been transferred from animals to humans, and many of the studies we reviewed found that this transference poses significant risks for human health.”² The USDA, then an ardent proponent of CAFOs, responded to the draft report by suggesting that existing research on the issue was “not conclusive.” They asked the GAO to include more studies that questioned the significance of the linkage of antibiotic resistance to CAFOs. The GAO responded, “We found that only a few studies have concluded that the risk is minimal, while many studies have concluded that there is a significant human health risk from the transference” (italics added). The Center for Disease Control was even sharper in rebuking USDA's comments

In calling for a nationwide moratorium on CAFOs, the American Public Health Association cited more than 40 scientific reports indicating health concerns related to CAFOs³ -- including studies conducted by the University of North Carolina Medical School, the University of Iowa Medical School, and the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. The known health risks of CAFOs include contamination of air, water, soil, and foods with toxic chemicals, infectious diseases, antibiotic resistant bacteria, and E. coli 0157:H7.⁴ A prestigious commission funded by the Pew Charitable Trust concluded in their 2008 report, “The current industrial farm animal production system often poses unacceptable risks to public health, the environment and the welfare of the animals... the negative effects of the system are too great and the scientific evidence is too strong to ignore. Significant changes must be implemented and must start now.”⁵ The verdict is in; CAFOs have been convicted by the legitimate scientific community of posing significant

risks to public health. The only denials today come from those with a vested interest in industrial agriculture – including the USDA and major colleges of agriculture.

Regarding socioeconomic impacts, virtually every study done in the past 20-years has confirmed that CAFOs are detrimental to the economic and social quality of life of people in rural communities. Even in cases where larger, specialized farming operations have created jobs and generated economic activity, they have also brought greater social and economic inequity to the community. The rich got richer and the communities ended up with more poor people. The economic benefits went to a few wealthy investors, most of the new jobs were lower-paying than current jobs, and communities were left with fewer middle-income taxpayers to support the community. The only studies finding anything positive about CAFOs were those that focused solely on their aggregate economic impacts, while ignoring the negative impacts of income inequity on overall quality of life in communities.

Any tax benefits resulting from CAFOs are more than offset by increasing public expenditures for schools, law enforcement, and social services, in addition to the increased costs of maintaining roads and bridges due to increased truck traffic hauling feed and livestock to and from CAFOs. The research verifies that most of the promised increases in tax revenues never materialize, as most of the jobs go to people from outside the community and CAFOs spend relatively little for feed or other operating needs within their local communities. There is not a single documented case where local property tax rates have been reduced or local public services have been improved as a result of CAFOs choosing to locate in a community. Perhaps most compelling, there is not a single community where CAFOs represent a significant segment of the local economy that is looked to by other rural communities as a model for rural community development.

Various studies have found that increasing numbers of poor immigrants in CAFO communities, regardless of their ethnicity, bring fundamental changes in the social composition and structure of communities. This typically leads to increasing conflicts in schools, increased crime, and more family problems. A community “class structure” often emerges in which some “classes” of people are excluded from some aspects of community life. As a result there is a decrease in participation in community activities and less loyalty to local businesses. Local residents lose their sense of community and their ability to function for the common good. Whenever a few people benefit at the expense of their neighbors, it seems to violate an important rural ethic that destroys the social fabric of rural communities.

A 2006 study commissioned by the North Dakota Attorney General's Office provides a review of 56 socioeconomic studies concerning the impacts of industrial agriculture on rural communities. It concluded: “Based on the evidence generated by social science research, we conclude that public concern about the detrimental community impacts of industrialized farming is warranted. In brief, this conclusion rests on five decades of government and academic concern with this topic, a concern that has not abetted but that has grown more intense in recent years, as the social and environmental problems associated with large animal confinement operations [CAFOs] have become widely recognized” (*italics added*).⁶

People in many rural communities are in crisis. They are at a critical point in time when their actions or inactions will make a critical difference in the future of their communities, for either better or worse. The most valuable assets many rural communities possess are their natural environment and their strong sense of community. They are being asked to sacrifice those valuable assets so a few local “farmers” and outside corporate investors can benefit economically. Even more important, many rural communities are locked in a vicious cycle of decline and decay because they are losing their most precious resources for the future – the next generation, their children. In fact, rural parents routinely advise their children to go away to college and get a good education so they won't have to return to the community. People know in their heart there is no future in a community with an economy built on a foundation of industrial agriculture – certainly not on CAFOs.

Rural communities are at a point in time where they must choose between an industrial agriculture and a sustainable agriculture. A sustainable agriculture must be capable of meeting the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future. All economic value, in agriculture or the general economy, comes either from the earth or from society. A sustainable agriculture, or any type of sustainable development, must be ecologically sound and socially responsible if it is to sustain the productivity of the natural and human resources needed to sustain the economy. The crisis of sustainability is not just a crisis of agriculture and rural communities; it is a crisis that threatens the future of America and of humanity.

Until quite recently, questions of sustainability have seemed too esoteric and theoretical to interest most people. However, high gasoline prices in 2008 awakened many people to our continuing dependence on fossil energy. Even the major oil companies now admit that we are at or near a peak in global oil production. The remaining oil reserves will be more difficult and costly to retrieve and thus will be more scarce and expensive. Fossil energy from other sources is expected to follow a similar pattern, peaking and dissipating over the next few decades. Global climate change is an inevitable consequence of fossil energy use. Greenhouse gasses are released into the atmosphere anytime energy is released from a biological source, including the fossil energy in oil, natural gas, and coal. So, we can't use the earth's remaining stocks of fossil energy without exacerbating the challenges of global warming.

The economic and social challenges of today are no less daunting than the ecological challenges. The current global financial crisis is a direct reflection of a thirty-year flight from economic reality. During the 1970s, the environmental and civil rights movements had forced us to address the environmental and social problems that had arisen from decades of economic extraction and exploitation. However, we soon discovered that protecting the environment and bringing those previously disenfranchised into the economic and political mainstream had economic costs. Rather than bear those costs, we retreated from reality during the 1980s and have been in a state of denial ever since.

Admittedly, some of the economic growth of the 1990s was real, primarily that associated with new electronic technologies. However, much of the so called boom was supported by “irrational exuberance” – a term used by Alan Greenspan to describe purely speculative price increases in the stock markets. When the “dot.com bubble” finally burst, Wall Street found ways to create a new financial “house of cards” – another retreat from reality. We now know that virtually all of

the economic growth since 2000 was fueled by unethical financial practices that promoted irresponsible borrowing and spending. The house of cards has collapsed and no one knows how much of what's left of the economy is real and how much is illusion.

The 30-year flight from reality has also had dire consequences for American society. At no time since the “gilded age” of the early 1900s has the gap between the wealthy and the rest of us been so great. The income of the top one-percent amounts to more than the total income of the bottom one-half of Americans, at least it did before the financial meltdown. In the words of Alan Greenspan, former Federal Reserve Chairman, “The income gap between the rich and the rest of the U.S. population has become so wide, and is growing so fast, that it might eventually threaten the stability of democratic capitalism itself. The rising economic tide has not raised the level of economic well-being of all Americans. The God-given promise of our democracy that all are equally deserving of their full measure of happiness has begun to ring hollow.

Some scholars claim the Chinese proverb about interesting times is the first of three curses, – or blessings – each being more severe than the pervious. The second is: May you come to the attention of those in authority. The ancient Chinese obviously understood that governments do not always serve the interests of their people. Perhaps they also understood that in times of crisis people are more willing to work together through their government, or even force their government, to serve the common good.

Government certainly has not been an ally of those opposing CAFOs, at least not up to now. Obviously, existing environmental and health regulations are not adequate to protect the people of rural areas, as verified by the widespread and persistent health and environmental problems associated with CAFOs. Most politicians have not been willing to defy the economic and political power of corporate agriculture. So, rural people have been left with no alternative other than to stand up for themselves and proclaim their basic democratic rights of self-defense and self-determination. We must force those in positions of authority to start confronting the truth.

We must explode the myth that we can have continuing economic prosperity without taking care of the earth and caring for people. The economy produces nothing; it simply facilitates the extraction of value from natural and human resources. We have created an economy that is very efficient in extracting and exploiting but does nothing to renew or regenerate the productivity of either the natural resources of the people that it “uses up.” Our so called “free market” economy, lacking in either ethical or legal restraint, quite simply is not sustainable.

CAFOs are a part of the economic myth that we can have economic prosperity without environmental or social responsibility. The most popular economic development opportunities offered to rural communities today are prison, landfills, and toxic waste incinerators. At the bottom of the list are giant confinement animal feeding operation – CAFOs. None of these so called opportunities can sustain rural economic development. We are turning rural America into the dumping grounds for our industrial society. Unfortunately, many communities don't know what else to do. They have been systematically abused for so long they have come to accept disrespect and degradation as inevitable. They simply don't know where to turn for help.

In some places at least, rural people are standing up for their rights and the authorities are at least beginning to pay attention. Those opposing CAFOs are not winning all of their battles, but they are slowly winning the war. While there have been some legal victories in zoning regulations and nuisance suits, the Achilles heel of CAFOs is public health risks. Thus far, the courts have upheld the rights of local communities to regulate CAFOs more stringently than in federal and state laws, when such regulations are clearly justified for the protection of public health. The scientific evidence linking CAFOs to public health risks is compelling. Local people must get the attention of local authorities, develop compelling cases, and demand appropriate actions. Local authorities have no greater responsibility than protecting public health.

A resurgence of community activism may turn out to be the most important impact of CAFOs on rural communities. The future leadership of rural America is emerging among today's opponents of CAFOs. They are learning to organize, inform themselves, gain the attention of local authorities, and then work together to make a difference in the future of their communities. They are learning to deal with endless frustrations and survive the inevitable setbacks, but little by little, they are winning the CAFO war. They are learning how to change local, state, and national government – to make them serve the interest of the people. They are demanding attention of those in positions of authority.

The last of the three Chinese curses – or blessings – is May you find what you are looking for. Perhaps the ancient philosopher was suggesting that we don't really want the things we think we want. On the other hand, he could have been suggesting that in times of crisis we have the greatest opportunities to bring about the fundamental changes we really need to create a better future. The latter is the more accurate description of these “interesting times.” There has never been a more promising time for the people of rural America to invest their time, energy, intellect, and money, in restoring the health, productivity, and well-being of rural people and places.

For farming communities, a host of new opportunities are emerging today in response to environmental, and social concerns associated with industrial foods and farming methods. The new markets for natural, organic, local, and sustainably produced foods are not just small market niches, as the critics claim. These markets are small today only because they are the early stages in the emergence of new, post-industrial systems of farming and food production.

Markets for organic foods have been the fastest growing segment of the American food system for the past 20 years, doubling every four or five years. Organic consumers are not simply concerned about pesticides and fertilizers but also hormones and antibiotics, e-coli and salmonella, obesity and diabetes, and a wide range of social and ethical issues associate with today's industrial food system. Recent surveys indicate that around three-fourths of American consumers have a strong preference for locally grown foods grown on small family farms. They want to know where their food comes, how it is produced, and who produced it. The future of American agriculture belongs to who can produce food with ecological and social integrity.

Among the most promising of the new sustainable/local alternatives are grass-based, free-range, and pastured livestock and poultry. There are plenty of logical alternatives to CAFOs. Grass-based livestock production reduces fossil energy use and greenhouse gas emissions, cuts investment and production cost, reduces use of pesticide, fertilizer, and antibiotics, eliminates

growth hormones, reduces soil erosion, facilitates manure management, and conforms easily to humane standards of animal husbandry. This is the future of animal agriculture – not CAFOs.

The new sustainable farming systems emerging today will be capable of feeding the world's growing population. Sustainable farms can produce just as much food per acre, with far less fossil energy; they are just more “management intensive.” Feeding the world will just require more thinking, caring farmers – so what's wrong with that? With fossil energy depletion and global climate change – meaning rising costs of fossil energy – sustainable agriculture will be even more economically efficient than industrial agriculture in the future. The only true food security of any nation is in the productivity of the land and the willingness and ability of its farmers to produce food for people rather than give priority to profits.

In this time of crisis the people of rural communities have the opportunity to “find what they are looking for.” Many rural places still have clean air, clean water, open spaces, scenic landscapes, and opportunities for a life of peace, quiet, and privacy. The people in many rural communities still have a sense of belonging, where people know and care about each other. Crime rates are low and a sense of safety and security is the norm. These attributes are becoming increasingly scarce in America, and thus are becoming increasingly valuable. Many people are able to work from anywhere in these days of high speed travel, the internet, and cell phones. Many are choosing to work in places that are good to live – increasingly in rural areas. The future of rural communities is not only in the productivity of the land but also in the imagination, creativity, ethics, and honesty of the people of rural communities.

Now, in this time of crisis, is the time for rural people to rise up and reclaim their right to protect their health and the natural environment from industrial agriculture. Now is the time for rural communities to demand fundamental changes in the way they are treated by their local, state, and national governments. Now is the time for rural people to find what they have been longing for – to create good places to live, where their children and children's children will choose to live and flourish. But first, rural people must proclaim their basic human rights of self-defense and self-determination and begin to restore grassroots democracy.

The things that rural people must do to confront the crisis of CAFOs are the same things all Americans must do to confront the ecological, social, and economic crisis that confronts our nation. At such times in the past, President Obama said, America has carried on not because of the skill or vision of those in high office, but because “We the People have remained faithful to the ideas of our forebearers.” “As much as government can and must do, it is ultimately the faith and determination of the American people upon which the nation rests.” For all of us – rural, urban, suburban, and exurban – the task before us may not be easy but our way forward is becoming increasingly clear.

As President Obama said, “Our challenges may be new. The instruments [and technologies] with which we meet them may be new. But those values upon which our success depends – hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism – these things are old. These things are true.” These are rural values; these are American values; these are human values. These are the values we must rely on to guide us in this time of crisis. These are

the old truths that we must reclaim as ours. These are the true values upon which we must rebuild our democracy.

End Notes

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